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JOHN MILTON

1608-1674

JOHN COOKE, M.A.

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JOHN MILTON

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BY

JOHN COOKE, M.A.
JOHN MILTON

1608-1674

A Lecture delivered in the Church of St. Dunstons, Dublin, on the occasion of the Anniversary of the Birth of John Milton, 1608-1674.

DUBLIN

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JOHN COOKE, M.A.

A Lecture, delivered in the Parochial Hall,
St. Bartholomew's, Dublin, on the occasion of
Milton's Tercentenary, December 9, 1908

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JOHN MILTON

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SHAKESPEARE'S not excepted, no name is better known in the households of the land than Milton's. The popular Protestant conception of hell is largely Miltonic. The nursery teaching of the temptation in Eden, the rebellion of Satan and his punishment are traditionally Miltonic also, and much of the Puritan tone and colour of the sacred themes treated of in the great epic have entered into the religious thought of the ages from the poet's death until now.

But with the average reader the knowledge of the poet and his works is very limited. His wish had been that he should a "fit audience find though few," and this has been fully realised. That such should be so with one who has left so indelible an impression upon the literature and religious thought of the land is strange, yet true; but the reason lies chiefly in the very nature and character of the works, and to a less, but still important, extent in the character of the poet himself.

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Milton's genius unfolded itself in childhood, and it was fortunate for him that his father was a man of good education, a man of refinement, with considerable musical culture, and that he was endowed with sufficient means to be able to afford the best education of the time to his son. He gave him a full University career at Cambridge, allowed him to live the studious life of a scholar for years, and sent him to the Continent, where he lived for a time among the most cultured men of the age, in some of its chief cities. Up to the age of thirty-two, Milton had not earned, nor was it necessary for him to earn anything. But Milton's life was not idle. In addition to writing his early poetry, a small quantity, but among the choicest in literature, he had been a close student; he became an accomplished scholar and master of many languages, and among the great poets none bring to their verse such a range of learning as he. Scholarship did not hamper Milton's genius as there is a danger of its hampering the genius of lesser men. He bears the burden of his erudition lightly, and from the vast storehouse of knowledge at his command, he weaves into the warp and woof of his prose and verse names of persons and places, incidents and illustrations drawn from the history and literature of many lands, so that Milton requires from

the student of his works a greater equipment than any other poet. For this reason the close study of Milton will ever be for the "fit though few."

The picture of Milton as a child was painted by Cornelius Jansen, a young Dutch artist, who about that time had settled in Blackfriars. Milton retained his great beauty in youth and manhood, and he was called after his college at Cambridge, "The Lady of Christ's." Even when he became blind his appearance did not suffer, for his eyes looked undimmed, and he boasted, and boasted truly, that the only false thing about him was his eyes.

No man ever took his life more seriously than Milton, nor lived one of greater moral purity, nor cherished more lofty ideals; and yet, everything that could be said to blacken his character was said in his own day and long after it. He had many times to defend himself against the grossest charges, which he does in passages amongst the noblest and loftiest in English prose. That he was capable all through life, even when he had fallen on dark and evil days, of inspiring friendship and affection we have ample proof. In his early days he was by no means the austere Puritan popular imagination conjures up; but yet there was in Milton a lonely grandeur, a lofty isolation, and a self-dedication to the highest purposes of life which

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separated him from the crowd, and from much of the pleasures and friendly intercourse of general society. Milton was born in the last days of the Renascence in its decay; but he imbibed its influence, and it gave light and grace to the best of the Puritan spirit within him. He steeped himself in Spenser's verse, of which there is very little echo in his own, and how he honoured Shakespeare we know from the lines written on him. The Mermaid Tavern in Friday Street was close by Bread Street, where Milton was born. It was the well-known scene of the famous wit combats of the Elizabethan dramatists, of which Beaumont speaks:—

What things have we seen
Done at the Mermaid! heard words that have been
So nimble, and so full of subtle flame,
As if that every one from whence they came
Had meant to put his whole wit in a jest,
And had resolved to live a fool the rest
Of his dull life.

One wonders how oft the attention of the great wits was caught by the angelic face of the child as they passed to these combats; or if the hand of the mighty dramatist, Shakespeare himself, was ever laid in caress upon the head of him who was to become one of the mightiest of epic poets.

At twelve years of age he went to St. Paul's School; he wrote verses, and a friendship was established with Alexander Gill,

son of the head-master, and the best writer of classical verse of his time. Another lasting school friendship was established with Charles Diodati, son of an Italian Protestant physician, who had established a successful practice in London at that time. Milton graduated at twenty-one, and in that year wrote his "Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity." Written at so early an age, it is one of the finest poems in our literature; and although it has the defects of youthful composition, and a certain ruggedness at times, yet it shows a real mastery in plan and execution. It is marked by a wealth of illustration and a majesty of style and harmony that distinguish Milton above all other poets. It has in embryo all the qualities of "Paradise Lost," and here at a bound he reached "Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme." A brief analysis of the poem shows this. After some introductory stanzas, in a few master-strokes he describes the night of that "winter wild" when "all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright," while the "harbinger with turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing—strikes a universal peace through sea and land." Silence reigns. Even the winds hushed with wonder "smoothly the waters kissed, whispering new joys to the mild ocean." The stars "stand fixed in stedfast gaze" while the sun with-

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holds his wonted speed, ashamed to rise. The ears of the shepherds on the lawn are touched by a music "never by mortal fingers struck," and as the heavens glow with an unwonted light, "the helmed cherubim and sworded seraphim—harping in loud and solemn choir," break the silence of the long brooding night, and announce the birth of the Prince of Peace. The crystal spheres ring out in their nine-fold harmony, moving in melodious time with the triumphant chorus of the angelic throng. Truth and Justice "orbed in a rainbow," with Mercy, "throned in celestial sheen," will now descend to earth; and as the music swells and falls the imagination is enrapt with dreams of the future ages, with the message of peace on earth and goodwill to man. But the "bitter Cross" must be borne ere the "wakeful trump of doom thunders through the deep," announcing the destruction of Hell and Sin, and the binding of the Old Dragon in chains beneath the earth. Yet now, with the new light that has arisen, paganism, with its host of gods and goddesses, is crushed to earth, and its oracles struck dumb. Its myriad priests and attendants, like "flocking shadows pale," in terror and affright, troop to their infernal doom. And as the sun, "curtained with cloudy red, pillows his chin upon an orient wave" and rises above the horizon in the East, the triumphant chorus over the

Redeemer's birth gradually dies away, and the Virgin lays the sleeping Babe at rest, while "bright-harnessed angels" hover in watch over His infant slumbers.

All this is in the true Miltonic manner, and a new thing in literature; while in structure, loftiness of conception, and nobility of treatment, it is a fit forerunner of "Paradise Lost." We have in it, too, early examples of Milton's wonderful epithets, in which he creates a picture or describes a character in one or very few words: "Leprous sin," "moonèd Ashtaroth," "sullen Moloch," "yellow-skirted fayes," "sable-stoled sorcerers," are instances of the extraordinary felicity of expression which bears such fruit in "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," and "Lycidas," and which have passed into the current speech of the land.

The "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" are "a landmark in the metrical art of (English) poetry," and if they have a fault it is that the art is only too apparent. They are perfectly polished gems of verse, and are contrasted in subject, scene, and thought, almost line by line throughout; while the rhythmic beat and balance of the metre is in very harmony with the joyous spirit of one, and the pensive thought of the other. The Masque of "Comus" set the seal of reputation on Milton as a poet. The critical explorer, from whom nothing escapes, has found the sources of "Comus" in the Elizabethan drama-

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tists, and the name Comus in a Latin poem by a Dutchman. We may take it that Fletcher's "Faithful Shepherdess" and Ben Jonson's masques were perfectly well known to Milton; but its real source is in the verse of Tasso and other Italian writers, to whom these dramatists owed much. But "Comus" is Milton's from the opening line to the last, in style, spirit, in the wide scope of imagination disclosed in the dialogue, and in the stern moral grandeur that inspires it. To the height of his ideal in personal conduct disclosed in "Comus," the men of those days could not rise, and still less in later years when, after the Restoration, they fell from his zenith of purity to their nadir of moral turpitude. "Comus" is a pæan of praise to virtue, to the exercise of reason and will over the temptation of the flesh, to temperance in all things as the foundation of personal purity—and these are pleaded for with a strength and dignity of style, an intensity of moral purpose, and a majesty of expression hitherto unexampled in English verse.

The pastoral of "Lycidas" is one of the greatest masterpieces of verse in European literature. In it Milton reached the maturity of genius. It is a magnificent dirge, the first of the few of that class that we have in English, to the memory of his college friend, Edward King, who lost his life coming from Chester to Dublin, where his father, Sir John

King, was State Secretary. It is open to criticism from the incongruity of the elements wherein rural descriptions are mixed with classical mythology, Christian doctrine, and biblical history. But out of these elements Milton creates with unique skill a finished work of organic unity. In it felicity of expression reaches its highest perfection; in the play of fancy and imagination we find the same exquisite skill, while the music of the verse thrills the ear with all the varied harmony of which Milton was master. In "Lycidas," the spirit of the Renaissance that Milton inherited, meets in contest with the stern Puritanism which the political pressure and passion of the hour stirred into vigorous life within him; and in the passages introducing the "Pilot of the Galilean Lake," he puts into the mouth of the Apostle Peter his own views on the ecclesiastical trouble of the time. It is the first warning note of that cyclonic tempest which was to drown the sound of laughter, song, and mirth in the nation for many years.

The culture and refinement of the Renaissance, with some of its gaiety of life, pervaded the atmosphere of the home and school in which Milton was reared. His education was of the widest, and nobly liberal. He says: "My father destined me while yet a little boy to the study of humane letters, which I seized with such eagerness

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that from the twelfth year of my age I scarcely ever went from my lessons to bed before midnight." But he imbibed all the Puritan seriousness of purpose, the stern resolve to govern personal conduct, and its more or less restricted view of life. His whole soul revolted against coarseness and loose pleasures, and he left Cambridge, as he tells us, "free from all reproach, and approved by all honest men." At twenty-three he wrote a birthday sonnet of self-dedication :

Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure even
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Towards which Time leads me, and the will of
Heaven.

All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great Task-Master's eye.

From such an attitude of mind as this, and the long years of preparation that followed, with the high qualities that Milton possessed, great things may well have been expected. Never, indeed, was self-dedication to that lot "Towards which Time leads" more nobly justified than it was in him.

All that was best in Puritanism tempered the soul and mind of Milton. In the personal dedication to service, the lofty idealism, and the intense moral concentration of mind and heart in all his work which distinguish him, he is its very highest type. But

lofty and ideal as were his temper and thought, his outlook on life was narrowed by Puritan concentration and Puritan self-restraint. He was too self-centred to give way to the full spirit of tolerance and breadth of view that pervaded the Renaissance. This robbed him of all humour, and that sense of proportion which readily distinguishes essentials from non-essentials, checks extravagance in word and deed, and makes men ready to compromise where principles admit—in other words, makes them practical in all affairs of life, in a world so varied and complex as this world is.

Under Puritanism, life became too intense in the struggle to put upon the nation at large the stamp of a religious system as narrow and intolerant in creed, as it was cold and hard in matters of daily duty. That sanity of judgment and saving grace of humour which characterised the Elizabethan age, and worked for moderation and tolerance, thus helping to solve many of its troubles, found no place under the rigid austerity of a system that derived its doctrines and its conceptions of the Divine Will more from the Old Testament than the New—a system which trusted too implicitly to an inner light that left little to judgment and reason, and whose rays failed to break in upon the gloom that brooded over the spirit

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of men held in bondage by the stern realism of things unseen.

The antagonism between the Puritans and the Church, which the Spanish danger and other political matters largely kept in check under Elizabeth, grew in intensity under James I. To the legacy of tyranny left by the Queen in the Court of Ecclesiastical Commission, James added a doctrine of Divine right of kings, and, what was still more detestable to the Puritan temper, a Divine right of bishops. Galling was the yoke of surrender to Elizabeth, as head of the Church; but men were now subjected to the lashing of scorpions in slavery to a political creed—aptly expressed by James in the aphorism, “No bishop, no king.” The bishops might flatter him, at the Hampton Court Conference of representative divines, that he spoke by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, but the Puritan clergy would not admit his infallibility. In this and other matters the dragon’s teeth were sown which sprang up in armed men under his successor. The deadly heritage left to Charles I. not only robbed the Crown of all its power and the loyalty due to it, but banished thousands from the land of their fathers to a wilderness in the West, and rained down upon the country the blood of its best and noblest sons.

Milton in a weighty passage draws a moving picture of the exiles: “What numbers of

faithful and freeborn Englishmen, and good Christians, have been constrained to forsake their dearest home, their friends and kindred, whom nothing but the wide ocean and the savage deserts of America could hide and shelter from the fury of the bishops. If we could but see the shape of our dear Mother England, as poets are wont to give a personal form to what they please, how would she appear, think ye, but in a mourning weed, with ashes upon her head, and tears abundantly flowing from her eyes, to behold so many of her children exposed at once, and thrust from things of dearest necessity, because their conscience could not assent to things which the bishops thought indifferent? What more binding than conscience? What more free than indifferency? Cruel then must that indifferency needs be that shall violate the strict necessity of conscience; merciless and inhuman that free choice and liberty that shall break asunder the bonds of religion."

The issue between Charles and the Puritans was first knit upon a minor struggle which roused passion to a white heat, but which very soon merged into the wider constitutional question. A more or less general observance of the first day of the week obtained in Europe, from about the beginning of the establishment of the Christian Church in Rome downwards. Much laxity existed in England for centuries, but it was

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under James I. that some Puritan leaders, from a study of the Old Testament, first strongly pressed for an observance of Sunday on the lines of the Jewish Sabbath. But this was as strongly opposed by the Lutherans and the Church of Geneva. The Declaration of James I. in 1618 regulating the observance for the people of Lancashire, who were mainly Roman Catholic, is known as the "Book of Sports," and gave mortal offence to the Puritans. It did not order sports and pastimes to be held, as has been often asserted; but it regulated them, forbidding many of the most objectionable and permitting others, all indeed of which were practised more or less throughout the country. The fire which the "Book of Sports"—merely a few pages of print—kindled, spread, and much fresh fuel was added when Charles I. commanded it to be read in churches. Laud supported the King, and it was not the least of the offences remembered against him. Baxter, in temperate language, draws a graphic picture of the results of the Declaration. "I cannot forget that in my youth in those late times, when we lost the labours of some of our conformable godly teachers for not reading publicly the 'Book of Sports,' and dancing on the Lord's Days—one of my father's tenants was the town piper, hired by the year, and the place of the dancing assembly was not an hundred yards from our

door, and we could not on the Lord's Day either read a chapter, or pray, or sing a psalm, or catechise or instruct a servant, but with the noise of the pipe or tabor, and the shoutings in the street continually in our ears, and even among a tractable people we were the common scorn of all the rabble in the streets, and called Puritans, and Precisians and hypocrites. . . . And when the people by the book were allowed to play and dance out of public service time, they could so hardly break off their sports, that many a time the reader was fain to stay till the pipers and players would give over; and sometimes the morrice dancers would come into the church in all the linen and scarfs, and antic dresses, with morrice bells jingling at their legs. And as soon as Common-Prayer was read did haste out presently to their play again."

It was easy to credit the Royal attempt to regulate the Sabbath with such a state of things as this. But a strong light is shed on another side of the evil by Baxter himself. "We lived in a county," he says, "that had but little preaching at all. In the village where I was born there were four readers successively in six years time, ignorant men, and two of them immoral in their lives. . . . In the village where my father lived there was a reader of about eighty years of age that never preached, and had two churches about twenty miles distant. His eyesight failing

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him, he said Common-Prayer without book; but for the reading of the Psalms and chapters he got a common thrasher and day-labourer one year and a tailor another year, for the clerk could not read well. And at last he had a kinsman of his own (the excellentest stage-player in all the country, and a good gamester, and a good fellow) that got Orders and supplied one of the places. . . . After him another neighbour's son took Orders, when he had been a while an attorney's clerk and a common drunkard. . . . These were the schoolmasters of my youth . . . who read Common-Prayer on Sundays and Holy Days, and taught school and tiddled on the week-days, and whipt the boys when they were drunk, so that we changed them very oft. Within a few miles above us were nearly a dozen more ministers . . . poor ignorant readers, and most of them of scandalous lives." Well, indeed, might Milton in "Lycidas" give a lash to these "blind mouths" climbing into the fold—

The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread.

Laud was fully sensible of the state of things in the Church, and of the open disregard of decency in the conduct of the services by many of the clergy, and he became the champion of Uniformity

throughout the kingdom. Milton, who from early years was destined for the Church, was conscientiously prevented from taking Orders, owing to the course events were taking.

At his trial in 1643, Laud said: "Of all diseases I have ever hated a palsy in religion, well knowing that too often a dead palsy ends that disease in the fearful forgetfulness of God and His judgments. Ever since I came in place I laboured nothing more than that the external public worship of God, too much slighted in most parts of the kingdom, might be preserved, and that with as much decency and uniformity as might be. . . . And I evidently saw that the public neglect of God's service in the outward face of it, and the nasty lying of many places dedicated to that service, had almost cast a damp upon the true and inward worship of God; which, while we live in the body, needs external helps, and all little enough to keep it in any vigour." Of the sincerity and truth of this testimony there can be no question. But in the very enforcement of authority, especially when enforced strictly, danger lay of interfering with the liberty of conscience, which Milton was soon to champion with trumpet tongue. Individual freedom could only lead, as Laud saw, to dissent, disunion, and heresy; while under the observance of a compulsory ceremonial

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and a uniformity of doctrine, men, in Milton's view, were nothing but perjured hypocrites, or slaves in bondage to the rules of a rigid religious system. Between these extreme views there could be no compromise, and between the parties holding them the issue had to be fought to the death. Milton, "Church-outed" by the prelates, as he terms it, says, "Coming to some maturity of years, and perceiving what tyranny had pervaded the Church, that he who would take Orders must subscribe slave, and take an oath withal, which, unless he took with a conscience that would retch, he must either straight perjure or split his faith; I thought it better to prefer a blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing."

On Sabbatarian grounds, and on the ground of Uniformity, thousands were driven as exiles from the country; and many good clergy were deprived of their livings on refusal to read the "Book of Sports" in their churches. Men gave way to fierce fanaticism under such circumstances as these. In the early Massachusetts settlement walking, cooking, riding, and other similar acts were forbidden on the Sabbath; public whipping and a fine of 40s. were inflicted for breaking it by any sport or pastime; and in New England women were forbidden to

kiss their children on the Lord's Day. The rise of Presbyterianism in England became rapid. It replaced Episcopacy as the Established Church, and the Directory was substituted for the Prayer Book. A rigid Sabbatarianism was enforced as strict as in America. Warrants could be issued to search for those absenting themselves from service; parents and householders were made responsible for their children and servants not to profane the Sabbath; and so far-reaching was the effort to enforce this strict observance that one ordinance enacted that—"All rogues, vagabonds, and beggars do on every Lord's Day and Fast Day repair to some church, and remain there soberly and orderly during the time of Divine worship." Of the hundreds of enactments dealing with these gentry from Saxon times down to the last bill before Parliament, this is the only one of a tender nature. It is possible many vagrants thought it most detestable. Such a hold, indeed, did these advanced views make upon the mind of the nation, that the principle—the Sabbath was not made for man but man for the Sabbath, is by no means abandoned by many at the present time.

Examples were not long wanting to show how far men were prepared to go on both sides. Leighton, for his "Zion's Plea against Prelacy," was Star-chambered by

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Laud, "flung into a nasty dog-hole full of rats and mice," as the author describes it, fined £10,000, set up in a pillory at Westminster, whipped, had his ears cut off and his nose slit, and branded in his face with S.S. (sower of sedition). Others similarly suffered. Prynne, for his "Histriomastix" ("A Scourge for Players"), a huge stupid work of over 1000 pages, full of learning, invective, and vile abuse, met with a similar fate. The title takes about 240 words, and describes the contents in ponderous terms: it should have died at its birth. Prynne suffered like Leighton, and had his ears cut off, which he remembered against Laud in the day of his fall and trial. Prynne was a barrister and dedicated his work to the Benchers of Lincoln's Inn; but the Benchers of it and the other Inns showed their disapproval of the author and his book by performing a magnificent masque, "The Triumph of Peace," by James Shirley, at a cost of £10,000, for which Inigo Jones supplied the machinery and decoration; the music cost another £1000. That Milton did not approve of such violence of language and attitude towards the stage, is evidenced by his writing "Comus" for performance at Ludlow Castle, the seat of the Earl of Bridgewater, Lord President of Wales. But that he equally disapproved of the savage punishment inflicted on Prynne, is

shown by his name not appearing as author of the masque at that time.

Milton was enjoying his continental journey and preparing for a visit to Greece when the rapid march of events at home recalled him. "I thought it base," he says, "to be travelling for amusement abroad while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home." To estimate Milton's prose works fairly it is necessary to keep well in mind his lofty patriotism and his passionate love of liberty—the liberty of a free people which is the proud boast of the English race. It was not necessary for him to take up arms, for he knew he could wield an instrument "mightier than the sword." He was engaged in teaching for nearly two years, when the whole question of Church discipline became a burning one; a bill was carried through the Commons to abolish prelacy in the Church, and Milton issued his pamphlets on Church Reform and Government. It is impossible for us to-day, living as we do in an age when toleration in all affairs of civilised society is the normal attitude of mind, to realise how men could breathe, as they did then, in an atmosphere heated with the sevenfold heat of burning controversies. It is doubtful if the passions of men were ever roused to a fiercer pitch of intensity; and they gave vent to a flood of controversial literature, marked by a hatred, violence, and invective unparalleled

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in our annals. The ordinary amenities of discussion were then not understood; and in the heat and smoke of such a conflict it was impossible for men to see issues clearly; or show any tolerance towards an adversary while holding, as one of the champions put it, that "toleration is the grand design of the devil, his masterpiece, and the chief engine he works to uphold his tottering kingdom." Some idea of the extent to which paper warfare was at this time carried, may be had from an examination of the Thomason collection of books, pamphlets, broadsides, and newspapers in the British Museum. As a bookseller in St. Paul's Churchyard he conceived the idea in 1640 of making a collection of fugitive literature, and it was continued to the accession of Charles II., a period of twenty years. There are in the collection 22,255 pieces, which are bound in 2008 volumes, and the great majority of these were produced between 1640 and 1653. When Cromwell became Protector, his censorship of the press checked the flood. There are thousands of controversial pamphlets and pieces, upon every conceivable subject that then stirred the mind of the nation; and the whole is a perfect mine of historical value for the student of research.

For the latter half of the seventeenth century, limiting the power of the Crown was a burning question in much of the political

literature of the time. Milton's "Tenure of Kings and Magistrates" was published a fortnight after the death of Charles I., and is a defence of this act of the revolution. His argument is summed up in this: Kings receive power and authority from a free-born people, and not by any Divine right from birth; their subjects can be punished for treason against them. As the subjects freely elect, so can they freely depose and punish the king for treason against his people. He published on the same lines a second pamphlet, the "Eikonoclastes," in answer to an anonymous work, the "Eikon Basilike," a pious book of prayers and meditation purporting to have been written by the King. It is now known to have been the work of Gauden, afterwards Bishop of Exeter. Fifty editions were published in a year in various languages, and it created a great sensation at home and abroad. Milton attacked it vigorously and systematically chapter by chapter, showing the increasing strength of his republican principles. His "Defensio pro Populo Anglicano," however, became a more noted work. This was written in answer to the "Defensio Regia pro Carolo I.," written by Claude de Saumaise (Salmasius), a Dutch professor, at the instigation of Charles II. His reputation was very great on the Continent, and Milton's reply turned him and his work into ridicule, so that Europe rang with

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his own fame. A defence was made for Salmasius in the "*Regii Sanguinis Clamor*," of which Alexander Morus, a Frenchman, but of Scotch ancestry, was the reputed author, and in the middle of the controversy Salmasius died. Milton's "*Defensio Secunda*" is a fierce and relentless attack on both, even extending to the printer. He spares them in nothing—public or private, and overwhelms them with scorn, insults, and invective. Morus repudiated the authorship (the real writer was Peter du Moulin, rector of a parish near York); but so heated was Milton by the controversy that he left himself in a false position, in regard to the charge of authorship and the personal attacks based upon it. The "*Areopagitica*" is a noble plea for the liberty of Letters, and has all the majesty, strength, and wealth of imagery which characterised his style. The title is taken from the discourse wherein Isocrates urged the Athenian Areopagus to undertake reforms within the body itself. Milton pleads with the English Areopagus to withdraw the ordinance issued in 1643, by which the Press was put under the strict supervision of a body of Presbyterian censors; and he published it without a licence, as he did the divorce tracts. Notwithstanding the strictness of the ordinance, it was often disobeyed, and much illicit printing went on by pirate presses, moved from place to place to avoid seizure.

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Many pious regrets have been uttered over Milton's share in this pamphleteering warfare, over the time wasted from the higher pursuit of poetry, and especially over the lapse from good taste, culture, and breeding which disfigure his prose writings at times. Had he given the time even to the production of abstract republics, like Sir Thomas More and other writers, the world would have admired his creations; but because he dealt with the concrete politics of the day, he is to be either censured or pitied. But Milton committed himself to this deliberately, and counted the cost.

In one of those personal references, of which we have so many from Milton, he gives his reasons as follows: "I saw that a way was opening for the establishment of real liberty; that the foundation was laying for the deliverance of mankind from the yoke of slavery and superstition. . . . I perceived that if ever I wished to be of use, I ought at least not to be wanting to my country, to the Church, and to so many of my fellow-Christians in a crisis of so much danger." Milton dedicated himself to this great task in defence of liberty. Towards a man following the clear call of such service to Church and State censure and pity are equally misplaced. All Milton's pamphlets were written with a definite purpose, and his survey is a wide one. The whole foundations and structure of Church

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and State had crumbled to the dust, and out of the chaos Milton aimed to create order, and give to man the fullest liberty in his relation to God, and in all his relations to his fellow-men, such as should exist in a well-ordered civilised society. But Milton had not the true temper of the politician, for the personal element entered into most of what he wrote. Vast as was his learning, great as was his command of language, lofty as his ideal was, and passionate as was his love of liberty, he had not that clear breadth of view, that unbiassed intellectual outlook, that profound knowledge of mankind gathered from experience, and that philosophic detachment which make Burke perhaps the greatest political thinker of all time.

Milton took all the risk of entering the lists as a political writer, not only from his opponents, but from those in power and authority whom he feared not to offend. There was no temporising in Milton; he was as dauntless and fearless as any knight in arms. His first set of pamphlets dealt with "Reformation and Church Discipline," and "Prelacy," against which he took an intensely strong and uncompromising attitude. Bishop Hall entered into the controversy, and, in a violent and most scurrilous manner, made a personal attack on Milton, and uttered the most odious suggestions against his moral conduct. The answer contains a short *apologia*, in which

he describes how his youth was spent, his lofty ideals and aspirations, and a confession to the strict practice of those virtues crystallised in the ideal purity of the Lady in "Comus." It is a magnificent justification, worthy of the man, and one of the finest passages in all his prose. Such personal references as these would by any other than Milton be considered as strongly tainted with vanity; with Milton it was different, and in a different degree. Fired as he was with a noble self-dedication to the sacred cause of liberty, Milton could not permit any charge against the purity of his motives and the purity of his aims and conduct to pass unchallenged. His sacrifice was too great in the cause not to speak in self-defence and justification.

It has often been said that had the prose works of Milton been written by any of the army of scribes of the day, they would have sunk into the same sea of forgetfulness, and his name, like theirs, been blotted out of the book of remembrance. But such a saying is idle. The works are Milton's, and have their value on personal as well as literary grounds. All experience tells on the shaping of life and character, in mental discipline, in the moulding, fashioning, and perfecting of all human productions, whether springing from brain or hand. Without the *sturm und drang* of Milton's twenty years of labour in the higher

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service of citizenship, the "Paradise Lost" would never have been the world's greatest religious epic as it now is.

Much, too, has been made of the violence of language in his prose, his invective, and the ferocity of his abuse; but it is well to remember that the worst of it is confined to his pamphlets written in Latin, a medium that has always been considered suitable for such pleasantries. And it was, too, the method of warfare of the hour. Milton aimed at being effective, and he was. His pamphlets told on England, and what was of more importance, on the Continent, where the pen of Milton, of which he says "all Europe rings from side to side," was as much feared as Cromwell's sword. Milton did not shrink from the combat, and he flung back with interest the stinging epithets that hurtled in the air: such as coxcomb, mongrel, cur, odious fool, dolt, idiot, clown, rank pettifogger—a huckster-at-law whose "jabberment is the flashiest and the fustiest that ever corrupted in such an unswilled hogshead." All this from our point of view is very bad manners and unworthy of a great name. But Milton was no mercenary hireling; making such sacrifices as he did, and with nothing to gain, he fought with all the resources at his command against many a venal scribe. "What should a man say more," he cries, "to a snout in

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this pickle? What language can be low and degenerate enough?" And he uses language "low and degenerate enough." But Milton was above all things a poet, with all a poet's sensibilities, his emotionalism and vivid imagination, qualities in no way conducive to the exercise of that balance and sanity of judgment so necessary in political controversy. But, on the other hand, they raise the level of controversy out of the prosaic plane of matter-of-fact expediency. To say that the only cause that Milton wrote for which has been won is the Liberty of the Press, is simply to admit that he was in advance of his time. Before the Reformation there was special machinery by means of canon law by which divorce could be had; but the Reformation swept all that away, and no redress could be given except by the High Court of Parliament. The principle of divorce lay in the Constitution, but not in English law, for each case was an Act in itself. Divorce was made legal in 1857, so we see how far in advance of his time Milton was in this matter. A free Commonwealth under the rule of the wisest and best men was Milton's ideal; it is probable that as our Commonwealth now is, with the power of the Crown to interfere in practical politics gone, Milton would be satisfied with it. Nothing could be further from his mind than a democracy. The Church has been divorced

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from the State in Ireland. Separation is looming in Wales, if not in England; so that here also the seed sown by Milton has to some extent ripened. The argument, too, misjudges the whole style and character of the prose works. His burning zeal in the cause of liberty, his passionate aspirations for purity of life and purity of thought under a free Commonwealth, his intense patriotism, and his soaring eloquence struck a note hitherto unheard in English politics. His prose is the prose of a great poet, and the great theme is Liberty. With all its faults, and it has many, his prose is the mightiest and most sonorous prose of all English writers. It overwhelms by its defiant tone of triumphant argument, driven home by the weight of a great moral power, and the strength of an intense individuality behind it. It takes magnificent flights, and rises and falls at times like the pealing of organ music that ever filled his ear with its majestic harmony. In scope, in wealth of illustration, in its unrivalled richness of epithet, and in the splendid rhythmic balance of its descriptive phrases, it is one of the most fertile fields of study for the student of the English tongue. The following well-known passage is a good example: "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle remewing her mighty

youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam, purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance; while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also who love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms."

The breath of scandal is never far off the name of public men. Scandal is the penalty men too often have to pay for greatness. The envious gossip-monger, the political opponent, and the cynical critic have made the most of Milton's divorce pamphlets. The elements of tragedy lay in Milton's first marriage. How far love entered into it we know not. Mary Powell's father had borrowed £500 from Milton many years before, and it was never repaid. She came, a young bride in her eighteenth year, to him—a husband of thirty-five, to the home of a close student, a lofty idealist, a thinker, and a poet. A month after her marriage she returned to her parents on a visit, and when after many weeks Milton sent for her she refused to return, and his man was received with insults. Burning with a sense of personal wrong, and his sensitive nature stung to the quick, he entered upon an examination of the whole subject of matrimony, and dealt with it in a series of four divorce tracts.

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But it is little known that at this time the question of the position of women and the marriage tie was very keenly discussed, as the Thomason tracts show, and Milton was but one of the many that entered the field, although he has got ever since all the odium attached to his side of the controversy. Claims were made for women to appear in public, to preach, to petition and address Parliament—in fact a woman's rights movement, something like that in our own day. The pamphlets of Milton are a burning plea for a release from ill-assorted unions, and in none of his writings is the idealism of Milton more prominently shown. His courage and daring were unflinching, and he was exposed to all the fury of the Presbyterian party, with whom he now made an open breach, and whom he holds up to scorn in the well-known line—

New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large.

“Shallow Edwards,” whom he pillories in the same sonnet, published a list of the then heresies, and the 154th (a goodly number) is levelled at Milton's divorce theories.

The triumph of the Independent party in the field brought the Powells, who were Royalists, to seek for reconciliation with Milton. He readily forgave the wrong done him, and the scene of the meeting with his repentant wife was no doubt in his mind

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when, twenty years later, he wrote in "Paradise Lost"—

Eve . . . with tears that ceased not flowing,
And tresses all disordered, at his feet
Fell humble, and, embracing them, besought
His peace. . . . Soon his heart relented
Towards her, his life so late, and sole delight,
Now at his feet submissive in distress. . . .
At once disarmed, his anger all he lost.

Milton held the average Puritan view that man was superior to woman. Her special function was the domestic one, to which he refers in "Paradise Lost":

For nothing lovelier can be found
In woman than to study household good,
And good works in her husband to promote.

But that he honoured and loved woman, and realised how much she was to man, not only in the matter of domestic duties, but in intellectual and spiritual sympathy, and in sharing his hopes and aspirations in social affairs, we have ample evidence in his works. It was chiefly because his own marriage fell so far short of the ideal union that he uttered his burning appeal for a release. "Hate is of all things," he says, "the mightiest divider, nay, is division itself. To couple hatred therefore, though wedlock try all her golden links and borrow to her aid all the iron manacles and fetters

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of law, it does but seek to twist a rope of sand." Mary Powell became the mother of four children; three of them (daughters) survived. Four years after his wife's death he married again, and in fifteen months was a second time a widower. One of his first sonnets is to her, his "late espoused saint," in which he looks forward "to have full sight of her in heaven." Later he married again to one who ministered to him faithfully, if not affectionately, in his declining years. His domestic life was not happy. No doubt the life he led—the austere, self-centred life of a poet and thinker—was a trying one to women, especially in his blindness. High as his ideals were of education, it was not altogether successful with his nephews, and it was never extended to his daughters. If living to-day they would probably be polyglot like himself, take the highest distinctions at university examinations, and foremost in all athletic sports that girls take part in. Later they might lead in the Suffragette movement, whether Milton approved or not. They would certainly never be called upon to act as amanuenses to the blind poet; the typewriter would be brought in from the nearest office and perform the duty more effectively at twopence per folio. Enough has been made of the shadows on this Puritan home. The men with muck-rakes have stirred the sink of envious gossip

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and tradition concerning it to the bottom, and they are at it still.

Milton acted as Latin Secretary to the State during the Commonwealth, but he had nothing to do with directing the affairs of the hour. "His soul was like a star and dwelt apart." Wrapt in his own proud self-esteem and conscious of his own superiority, he stooped not for the favour of inferior men. Beyond his payment as an official there was no reward or emolument given to Milton for his literary services. The result of all his mental labours from childhood was the loss of his eyesight at the age of forty-three. When warned, he says: "The choice lay before me between dereliction of a supreme duty and the loss of eyesight. In such a case I could not listen to the physician, not if Esculapius himself had spoken from the sanctuary; I could not but obey that inward monitor, I know not what, that spake to me from heaven." He had no regrets, and in that splendid sonnet to his friend, Cyriack Skinner, written three years later, he tells us why:

I argue not

Against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate one jot
Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer
Right onward. What supports me, dost thou ask?
The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied
In Liberty's defence, my noble task.

There is nothing finer in human history than

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this. The Restoration saw the ruin of all his labours in the cause of liberty, and the death of all his hopes and aspirations for Church and State. He was ripe for Tyburn ; he lost most of the means he had, and thus, poor and in danger, he had to hide his head in safety ; but he "bated not one jot of heart and hope, but steered right onward." Probably in contempt for his helplessness he was left in peace, but the hangman went through the formality of giving his rebellious pamphlets to the flames.

On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
And solitude—

Milton turned within himself, and with prayerful confidence and all the ardour of his long-suppressed poetic genius addressed himself to the last, and by far the greatest of his life's tasks, and in five years "Paradise Lost" was written.

What strikes us at once in considering "Paradise Lost" is the vastness of its conception, embracing in its horizon the destinies of the whole human race, and with daring flights of imagination taking in the whole compass of Heaven, the kingdoms of the Earth, the illimitable wastes of Chaos, and the deep abyss of Hell. The stage of this mighty drama carries us to the farthest limits of space, and its time-limits take us

to the very foundations of time itself. The vastness of the theme is only equalled by the vastness of its setting. Heaven or the Empyrean fades into the infinite; its crystal walls with opal towers shut it off from Chaos. From its gates sparkling with orient gems sweeps a road powdered with stars, whose dust is gold, leading to the throne of God. The mind is overwhelmed with the imaginative splendours of Heaven and the wealth of imagery expended on its description. There are fragrant bowers of amaranthine shade, where rest the Spirits Elect; the River of Bliss rolls its amber stream o'er Elysian flowers; rubied nectar flows in pearl, in diamond, and massy gold, from which immortality is quaffed; celestial tabernacles fanned by cool winds dot the expanse, and roseate dews float by living streams among the Trees of Life. The floor of Heaven shines like a jasper sea. Here sits the Almighty, high-throned above all height, surrounded by all the Sanctities of heaven, thick as stars, receiving from His sight beatitude past utterance. On His right the radiant image of His glory sat—His only Son. The multitude—

Lowly reverent

Towards either throne they bow, and to the ground
With solemn adoration down they cast
Their crowns inwove with amarant and gold.

Beneath is Chaos, a wild abyss, without

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bound, without dimension, where time and place are lost; and in which eternal anarchy reigns amidst the warring elements. Here enthroned sit Chaos and sable-vested Night, eldest of things. Deep in Chaos lies Hell within four concentric circles, a land of solid fire, circled by a waste of "rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death." Without is Lethe, and surrounding all—

A frozen continent
Lies dark and wild, beat with perpetual storms
Of whirlwind and dire hail.

Hell is guarded by triple gates, "before which sit on either side a formidable shape." There is nothing more terrible in literature than the description of the night-hag Sin, her misbegotten son, the grisly terror Death, and their incestuous brood of impish fiends. The figures of Sin and Death are the very personifications of Horror. Suspended from the Empyrean by a golden chain hangs a hollow sphere within which lies the Earth, surrounded by the Planets and other crystalline Spheres, whose movement rings out in harmony to the music of the heavenly throng. This is the Ptolemaic system which Milton adopted, and never was any scientific system or theory robed in such poetic splendours, or clothed in such majestic imagery. Milton had visited

Galileo ; he was acquainted with the Copernican system, of which there is evidence in the eighth book of "Paradise Lost," but the older theory was more suited to his setting of the incidents and subject-matter of the epic.

Milton left behind him a treatise on Christian doctrine, written at the close of his life, which was lost and only recovered by accident early in the last century, in the old State Paper Office, Whitehall. It helps us to get a distinct view of his religious beliefs at the time of writing "Paradise Lost," and is thus so far of interest. Chiefly, and very briefly, they are these: Adam's fall was certain, but not necessary, since he had the power of exercising free-will. All are predestined to life eternal, if they have faith in Christ, and sufficient grace to believe, if they choose to do so. God is eternal, but the Son is not, nor co-essential, nor coequal. The Holy Spirit is created of the substance of the Father, but later than the Son and inferior to Him. Since all things are created of God there is no annihilation. Sin is the result of the Fall ; death the result of disobedience. Christ fulfilled the law, and paid the necessary penalty for man by His death and passion. Milton's Arian views are seen in many passages in "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained"; they differed in many respects

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from the common Puritan beliefs, notably on the Sabbath and divorce, and he was clearly no Calvinist.

The theological nature of the great epic, it is commonly said, lessens its interest; but that is chiefly because it is presented in an argumentative form like the reports of parliamentary debates. The debaters, too, are chiefly spiritual beings, and their disputations have no human interest, since human feeling and passion lie not at the root of their utterance. But what gives these scenes their grandeur and spiritual significance, and that transcendent fervour to the argument, is the deep-seated feeling—which is the life-spring of Puritanism—that the Shekinah of Glory sheds a benign influence, omnipotent over all.

There is a human interest in "Paradise Lost," inasmuch as the struggle between Good and Evil pervades it throughout, and we cannot but be moved at the process of temptation, the wiles of the tempter, and the result. But the special difficulty Milton had to deal with was that Adam and Eve knew no evil; they were wholly good. Here he was limited in his treatment, and there was no room for the force and passion of man's complex nature to find expression within the wide range of epic art. Nor can we altogether enter into the feelings of our first parents; they were not as we are, and it stretches

our imagination to the utmost to put ourselves in their place. It is here, indeed, that Milton's genius triumphs and wins our admiration for his treatment of the great theme. The property of poetry is illusion, to render things seen that are not seen, and to do so effectively we must enter into its spirit. Many of the objections urged against "Paradise Lost" arise from an inability or refusal to give way to the imaginative flights the poem demands. The inhabitants of the Empyrean and Hell are not visualised—they are remote and spectral, moving in vast perspectives of space, and Milton was too great an artist to create them otherwise; yet they are sufficiently real to be convincing and to satisfy the demands made upon the imagination, when we give the imagination free play.

Milton's whole scheme rests on a biblical foundation; this is extended, and embraces not only the Hebraic demonology but the deities of the classical world. He believed that these personalities had fallen from their high estate, that they were agents of Satan sent to earth to tempt men to destruction in making them children of disobedience, and so compensate themselves for their own evil state. Milton made all possible use of these beliefs. The revolt against the Son of God in Heaven, the fall of the angels, the power of the tempter and his satellites in

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continuing the war against Heaven through man on Earth, and the whole pantheon of the heathen, with the evil worship accorded them, are embraced in his great epic survey. But the belief in all this was decaying in his own day; he calculated not at all on the corroding influence of time in rationalising belief in things biblical; he could not foresee modern scepticism and days of the higher criticism. But to him and the Puritans of his day—Satan, Beelzebub, Belial, Mammon, and Moloch were as real as the Royalist leaders; and the spiritual foes in Bunyan's allegory were no less real existences than Christian and Faithful the pilgrims.

Though Adam and Eve are intended by Milton to be the central figures of "Paradise Lost," and the plucking of the apple the central incident, yet the figure of Satan—the great protagonist—and his revolt, are equally dominating; some indeed consider Satan the hero of the epic. Milton exhausts language and imagery in the picture of Satan, the haughty imperious monarch of a rebel host in the nether Hell. He does not deal in details as Dante does; his effects are produced by broad masses of light and shade stretching over his immense canvas, and which can only be rightly realised when viewed at a distance. Satan lies in adamant chains prone

on the burning flood extended many a rood.

He scours the right hand coast, sometimes the left ;
Now shaves with level wing the deep, then soars
Up to the fiery concave towering high—

describes his exit from hell. Equally effective is the description of him when ready to engage in battle with Gabriel—

Satan, alarmed,
Collecting all his might, dilated stood
Like Teneriff or Atlas, unremoved :
His stature reached the sky, and on his crest
Sat horror plumed.

His figure is indeed sublime. He has not lost all the qualities that appeal to sympathy and admiration. He is beloved by his subjects, and, rebel tyrant as he is, he has their loyal devotion. He is not wholly bad, but Milton suffers him to undergo a process of degradation. His boundless egotism, his all-aspiring pride and arrogant self-will bring ruin on his followers, whom he hesitates not to sacrifice. Yet he is sorry, and tears well up in his eyes "such as angels weep" in contemplating them. He hates God and heaven ; yet he admits the justice of the Almighty, and he regrets the glory of Paradise, from which he is shut out. But the evil in his nature predominates—there is but a lingering fragrance of good remaining ; but this in the end is dissipated, and he becomes the Evil Thing itself. In the garden, as a serpent

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tempting Eve, he has beauty; but having destroyed beauty and returning, he is received with the hissing of serpents, the rebel throng having changed their shape in punishment for his act, and he becomes the Old Dragon—"A monstrous Serpent on his belly prone." But the early impression of Satan remains, and becomes intensified from the character-drawing in "Paradise Regained," degraded again as he there is. Milton's drawing and colouring of Satan were in spite of himself; the necessity of the epic demanded it, and he proved true to his genius and his art.

There is nothing in all literature comparable with the figures of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. They are primal, they are above humanity, and yet human. Eve is all pure womanhood, and Milton's description is the most perfectly ideal picture of it, by any poet in any language:—

So absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best.
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded ; wisdom in discourse with her
Loses, discountenanced, and like folly shows.
Authority and reason on her wait,
As one intended first, not after made
Occasionally ; and to consummate all,
Greatness of mind, and nobleness their seat,
Build in her loveliest and create an awe
About her, as a guard angelic placed.

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Adam is more intellectual than Eve, more contemplative, whose only duty is to God, but Eve's is to God in him—

God is thy law, thou mine, to know no more
Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise.
With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and their change, all please alike.

The whole of this scene is suffused with sensuous beauty. Milton's restraint is extraordinary in his wonderful portrayal of Adam and Eve in their state of innocence; their souls are sinless, and as pure as the air of the Paradise which they breathe. Milton's own description of poetry is that it should be simple, sensuous, and impassioned, and the scenes in the fourth book combine these in their highest perfection. No one but Milton could have conceived these figures and scenes, and Milton only when he was blind, "with inward eye illuminated." It would seem, indeed, as if his wonderful invocation at the opening of the third book had been answered:

Celestial Light

Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate; there plant eyes; all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

The final scene of the Temptation and Fall, Adam's deliberate act of sinning with Eve, after the first shock of dismay, is singularly

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striking and impressive, and above criticism. He reasons, yet resolves, knowing the consequences; love triumphs, and he accepts the future with Eve. Her character throughout is more complex; she gains in intensity after the Fall: she is less disputative, less governed by reason; she follows her instincts, and fearlessly faces the consequences. She is willing to accept the full sacrifice of their sin:

Both have sinned; but thou
Against God only; I against God and thee,
And to the place of judgment will return,
There with my cries importune heaven, that all
The sentence, from thy head removed, may light
On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe,
Me, me only, just object of His ire.

The final argument shows Adam's mental vision more widened, and his reason clearer than before the Fall. The end is nobly pathetic. The womanhood in Eve is supreme, and the incidental reference to motherhood is a true and delicate touch of genius. Nothing is finer in all Milton's works than the closing lines of the great epic:

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

The very simplicity of the passage gives the scene a wonderful reality. We are filled

with pity as we see the lonely downcast pair out on the plain, bounded by a world's wide horizon, to be filled in the æons yet to come, by the human race who were to suffer for their sin. One thought sustained them under the crushing weight of sorrow—the promise of the great deliverance of all mankind by the "Woman's Seed."

The Fall of Man leaves Satan and his rebel crew masters of the "Orbicular World"—the Earth and the circling spheres. Sin and Death have now spanned the space over Chaos between Hell and the World. The dread agents of Satan take dominion of the Earth and Air, and the human race become subject to them; they are acknowledged as gods, and receive the worship of men. But Paradise is regained through the Temptation of Christ and the second triumph over Satan. The poem of "Paradise Regained" is inferior to "Paradise Lost"; the subject does not admit of the same breadth of treatment, the same variety of disputation, or the same wealth of illustration. It is deficient in action; it has but a small choice of incident, and little or no epic intensity. It has, however, the same interest arising from the struggle between Good and Evil; but it is a war of words and long arguments. There is no room in it for the spirit-stirring sounds of battle—the clash of arms between marshalled forces—angels though they be,

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that characterise "Paradise Lost": such as this—

All the while
Sonorous metal blowing martial sounds :
At which the universal host up-sent
A shout that tore hell's concave, and beyond
Frighted the reign of Chaos and old Night.
All in a moment through the gloom were seen
Ten thousand banners rise into the air,
With orient colours waving.

Victory there is, but the sound is not the same, and the ear is not filled with the triumphant notes and grand hallelujahs that echo through the earlier great epic. But in his descriptions of the ancient civilisations, Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome, and their cities, Milton reaches the same soaring heights of imagination with undiminished strength of wing.

"Paradise Regained" and "Samson Agonistes" have none of the magnificence, the oriental display of colour, and the pictorial splendours of "Paradise Lost." But there is the same power and strength, and a special significance in restraint. In severity of style "Samson Agonistes" is unique in English literature. It is modelled upon the Greek drama and is purely Hellenic in treatment; so much so, that in tragic intensity, in the relentless pursuit of fate in human destiny, Milton's "Samson" is only paralleled in Eng-

lish by "King Lear." It is Puritan in spirit and temper, with the Puritan's religious fervour and moral aspirations. In it Milton portrays his own life and the downfall of his party, and one is astounded at the criticism of Dr. Johnson, that it is "a tragedy which only ignorance would admire and bigotry applaud": this to, as it has rightly been called, "the intensest utterance of the most intense of English poets"! Johnson was too good a Churchman and Tory to appreciate Milton with justice and impartiality; and, as a whole, he did all possible harm in his own time, and for long after, to the works and memory of the Independent Republican poet.

But Milton has long since entered into his inheritance. He needs no defence and no eulogium. His statue now stands at Cripplegate, before the church in which he was buried; it was unveiled in 1904 by Lady Egerton, descendant of the Earl of Bridgewater, for whose family "Comus" was written. If Milton is the most intense of English poets, he is also the most sublime. What more is needed? He created in his blank verse a vehicle worthy of his great theme, and it has never been approached by any of his host of imitators. Every line is in perfect scansion, and so delicate was his ear to sound, that he varies the rhythm to avoid monotony with such skill that it almost escapes attention. In his powers

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of description, in his scope and breadth of treatment, and in his wonderful display of colour, light, and shade he has no rival. In the music of his verse he is absolute and supreme. It swells with a majestic harmony of sound, like the diapason peals of a mighty organ through wide cathedral aisles, and then rises by ascending chords to the sweetest flute-like notes, which fade away in a dying symphony, leaving magic echoes in the memory, like the ethereal strains of an Æolian harp. Truly has it been sung of him by the greatest modern artist in words :—

O mighty-mouth'd master of harmonies,
O skill'd to sing of time or eternity,
God-gifted organ voice of England,
Milton, a name to resound for ages ;
Whose Titan angels, Gabriel, Abdiel,
Starr'd from Jehovah's gorgeous armouries,
Tower, as the deep-domed empyrean
Rings to the roar of an angel onset.

Milton learned the lesson which all ripe experience and wisdom teach, that, as the chorus in "Samson Agonistes" closes with, "All is best, though we often doubt." Of all those who cross the stage in the great civil strife, Milton is the purest figure and the noblest Englishman of his time. Borne in upon him was the truth of the Apostle's saying, "The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." He found peace at last in

full recognition of the omniscience of the Almighty. He accepted defeat with a proud self-consciousness in his own integrity. It is of himself he speaks in the lines uttered by Manoah over Samson's death :—

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast ; no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise or blame ; nothing but well and fair.

To us the cause of Puritan failure as a political system, and even as a practical rule of life, is easy to understand. Politics and the machinery of government cannot be built upon a narrow interpretation of biblical truths, or on morals drawn from the heroes of sacred history. Perfection cannot be gained in public or private affairs by refining down its ideals by an analytical process into the minutest standards of conduct, in utter disregard of the facts of life, and the forces of the environment which control them. The Puritan self-centred creed narrowed the outlook on life: the perpetual war with unseen forces of evil clouded the reason, dimmed faith, and bred fanaticism. They created a tyranny as great as the tyranny they displaced, and as a social and political system it could not stand. But the best in the Puritan spirit remained. Its lofty aspiration for personal rule of right conduct towards God, its implicit belief in His justice and omnipotence, and its patient

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acceptance of trial, sorrow, and suffering in the great struggle for freedom, shed a lustre upon the Puritan character and temper, from which men will receive influence for ages yet to come.

THE END

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acquaintance of that century and century in
 the first century of the century and a century
 upon the English character and history from
 which cannot be recovered in any way
 in time.

THE END



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